



HOLDING UP THE UNIVERSE

JENNIFER NIVEN



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*for Kerry,
Louis,
Angelo
& Ed,
who help hold up my universe.*

*and for all my readers everywhere,
who are the world to me.*

“Atticus, he was real nice . . .”

“Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them.”

—*To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee

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I'm not a shitty person, but I'm about to do a shitty thing. And you will hate me, and some other people will hate me, but I'm going to do it anyway to protect you and also myself.

This will sound like an excuse, but I have something called prosopagnosia, which means I can't recognize faces, not even the faces of the people I love. Not even my mom. Not even myself.

Imagine walking into a room full of strangers, people who don't mean anything to you because you don't know their names or histories. Then imagine going to school or work or, worse, your own home, where you should know everyone, only the people there look like strangers too.

That's what it's like for me: I walk into a room and I don't know anyone. That's every room, everywhere. I get by on how a person walks. By gestures. By voice. By hair. I learn people by identifiers. I tell myself, *Dusty has ears that stick out and a red-brown Afro*, and then I memorize this fact so it helps me find my little brother, but I can't actually call up an image of him and his big ears and his Afro unless he's in front of me. Remembering people is like this superpower everyone seems to have but me.

Have I been officially diagnosed? No. And not just because I'm guessing this is beyond the pay grade of Dr. Blume, town pediatrician. Not just because for the past few years my parents have had more than their share of shit to deal with. Not just

because it's better *not* to be the freak. But because there's a part of me that hopes it isn't true. That maybe it will clear up and go away on its own. For now, this is how I get by:

Nod/smile at everyone.

Be charming.

Be "on."

Be goddamn hilarious.

Be the life of the party, but don't drink. Don't risk losing control (that happens enough when sober).

Pay attention.

Do whatever it takes. Be lord of the douche. Anything to keep from being the prey. Always better to hunt than be hunted.

I'm not telling you all this as an excuse for what I'm about to do. But maybe you can keep it in mind. This is the only way to stop my friends from doing something worse , and it's the only way to stop this stupid game. Just know that I don't want to hurt anyone. *That's not why*. Even though that's the thing that's going to happen.

Sincerely yours,

Jack

PS. You're the only person who knows what's wrong with me.



Prosopagnosia /präsəpag'nōZH(ē)ə/ noun: 1. an inability to recognize the faces of familiar people, typically as a result of damage to the brain; 2. when everyone is a stranger.

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ONE DAY EARLIER

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If a genie popped out of my bedside lamp, I would wish for these three things: my mom to be alive, nothing bad or sad to ever happen again, and to be a member of the Martin Van Buren High School Damsels, the best drill team in the tristate area.

But what if the Damsels don't want you?

It is 3:38 a.m., and the time of night when my mind starts running around all wild and out of control, like my cat, George, when he was a kitten. All of a sudden, there goes my brain, climbing the drapes. There it is, swinging from the bookshelf. There it is, with its paw in the fish tank and its head underwater.

I lie on my bed, staring up into the dark, and my mind bounces across the room.

What if you get trapped again? What if they have to knock down the cafeteria door or the bathroom wall to get you out? What if your dad gets married and then he dies and you're left with the new wife and stepsiblings? What if you die? What if there is no heaven and you never see your mom again?

I tell myself to sleep.

I close my eyes and lie very still.

Very still.

For minutes.

I make my mind lie there with me and tell it, *Sleep, sleep, sleep. What if you get to school and realize that things are different and*

kids are different, and no matter how much you try, you will never be able to catch up to them?

I open my eyes.

My name is Libby Strout. You've probably heard of me. You've probably watched the video of me being rescued from my own house. At last count, 6,345,981 people have watched it, so there's a good chance you're one of them. Three years ago, I was America's Fattest Teen. I weighed 653 pounds at my heaviest, which means I was approximately 500 pounds overweight. I haven't always been fat. The short version of the story is that my mom died and I got fat, but somehow I'm still here. This is in no way my father's fault.

Two months after I was rescued, we moved to a different neighborhood on the other side of town. These days I can leave the house on my own. I've lost 302 pounds. The size of two entire people. I have around 190 left to go, and I'm fine with that. I like who I am. For one thing, I can run now. And ride in the car. And buy clothes at the mall instead of special-ordering them. And I can twirl. Aside from no longer being afraid of organ failure, that may be the best thing about now versus then.

Tomorrow is my first day of school since fifth grade. My new title will be high school junior, which, let's face it, sounds a lot better than America's Fattest Teen. But it's hard to be anything but TERRIFIED OUT OF MY SKULL.

I wait for the panic attack to come.



JACK

Caroline Lushamp calls before my alarm goes off, but I let her go to voice mail. I know whatever it is, it's not going to be good and it will be my fault.

She calls three times but only leaves one message. I almost delete it without listening, but what if her car broke down and she's in trouble? This is, after all, the girl I've dated off and on for the past four years. (We're *that* couple. That on-again, off-again everyone-assumes-we'll-end-up-together-forever couple.)

Jack, it's me. I know we're taking a break or whatever but she's my cousin. My COUSIN. I mean, MY COUSIN, JACK! If you wanted to get back at me for breaking up with you, then congratulations, jerkwad, you've done it. If you see me in class today or in the hallways or in the cafeteria or ANYWHERE ELSE ON EARTH, do not talk to me. Actually, just do me a favor and go to hell.

Three minutes later, the cousin calls, and at first I think she's crying, but then you can hear Caroline in the background, and the cousin starts yelling and Caroline starts yelling. I delete the message.

Two minutes later, Dave Kaminski sends a text to warn me that Reed Young wants to kick my face in for making out with his girl-friend. I text *I owe you*. And I mean it. If I'm keeping score, Kam's helped me out more times than I've helped him.

All this fuss over a girl who, if we're being honest, looked so

much like Caroline Lushamp that—at least at first—I thought it *was* her, which means in some weird way Caroline should be flattered. It’s like admitting to the world that I want to get back together with her even though she dumped me the first week of summer so that she could go out with Zach Higgins.

I think of texting this to her, but instead I turn off my phone and close my eyes and see if I can’t transport myself right back into July. The only thing I had to worry about then was going to work, scavenging the local scrap yard, building (mind-blowing) projects in my (kick-ass) workshop, and hanging out with my brothers. Life would be so much easier if it was just Jack + scrap yard + kick-ass workshop + mind-blowing projects.

You should never have gone to the party. You should never have had a drink. You know you can’t be trusted. Avoid alcohol. Avoid crowds. Avoid people. You only end up pissing them off.



LIBBY

It's 6:33 a.m. and I am out of bed and standing in front of the mirror. There was a time, a little over two years ago, when I couldn't, wouldn't look at myself. All I saw was the bunched-up face of Moses Hunt, yelling at me across the playground: *No one will ever love you because you're fat!* And the faces of all the other fifth graders as they started to laugh. *You're so big you block the moon. Go home, Flabby Stout, go home to your room.* . . .

Today, for the most part, I only see me—adorable navy dress, sneakers, medium-longish brown hair that my sweet but slightly demented grandmother once described as “the exact color of highland cattle.” And the reflection of my giant dirty cotton ball of a cat. George stares at me with wise gold eyes and I try to imagine what he might say to me. Four years ago, he was diagnosed with heart failure and given six months to live. But I know him well enough to know that only George will decide when it’s time for George to go. He blinks at me.

Right now, I think he would tell me to breathe.

So I breathe.

I've gotten really good at breathing.

I look down at my hands and they’re steady, even if the fingernails are bitten to the quick, and, weirdly, I feel pretty calm, considering. I realize: the panic attack never came. This is something to celebrate, so I throw on one of my mom’s old albums and dance.

Dancing is what I love most and dancing is what I plan to do with my life. I haven't taken lessons since I was ten, but *the dance is in me*, and no lack of training can make that go away.

I tell myself, *Maybe this year you can try out for the Damsels.*

My brain goes zooming up the wall, where it hangs, shaking. *What if it never happens? What if you die before anything good or wonderful or amazing ever happens to you?* For the past two and a half years, the only thing I've had to worry about has been my survival. The focus of every single person in my life, including me, has been: *We just need to get you better.* And now I'm better. *So what if I let them down after all the time and energy they've invested in me?*

I dance harder to push the thoughts out until my dad thumps on the door. His head appears. "You know I love a good Pat Benatar song first thing in the morning, but the question is: how do the neighbors feel?"

I turn it down a little but keep on moving. When the song is over, I find a marker and decorate one shoe. *As long as you live, there's always something waiting; and even if it's bad, and you know it's bad, what can you do? You can't stop living. (Truman Capote, In Cold Blood.)* Then I reach for the lipstick my grandmother gave me for my birthday, lean into the mirror, and paint my lips red.



JACK

I hear the shower running and voices downstairs. I pull the pillow over my face, but it's too late—I'm awake.

I turn on my phone and text first Caroline, then Kam, then Reed Young. The thing I say to all of them is that I was very drunk (an exaggeration) and it was very dark (it was) and I don't remember anything that happened because I was not only drunk, I was upset. *There's just this shit happening at home that I can't talk about right now, so if you can bear with me and find it in your heart to forgive me, I'll be forever in your debt.* The shit happening at home part is completely true.

For Caroline, I throw in some compliments and ask her to please apologize to her cousin for me. I say I don't want to contact her directly because I've already made a mess of things and I don't want to do anything else to make things worse between Caroline and me. Even though *Caroline* was the one who broke up with *me*, and even though we're currently in an off-again phase, and even though I haven't seen her *since June*, I basically eat crow and then throw it up all over my phone. This is the price I pay for trying to keep everyone happy.

I drag myself down the hall to the bathroom. The thing I need most in this world is a long, hot shower, but what I get instead is a trickle of warm water followed by a blast of Icelandic cold. Sixty seconds later—because that's all I can bear—I get out, dry off, and stand in front of the mirror.

So this is me.

I think this every time I see my reflection. Not in a *Damn, that's me* way, but more like *Hub. Okay. What have we got here?* I lean in, trying to put the pieces of my face together.

The boy in the mirror isn't bad-looking—high cheekbones, strong jaw, a mouth that's hitched up at one corner like he just got done telling a joke. Somewhere in the neighborhood of pretty. The way he tilts his head back and looks out through half-open eyelids makes it seem like he's used to looking down on everyone, like he's smart and he knows he's smart, and then it hits me that what he really looks like is an asshole. Except for the eyes themselves. They're too serious and there are circles under them, like he hasn't slept. He's wearing the same Superman shirt I've been wearing all summer.

What does this mouth (wide like Mom's) mean with this nose (wide like Mom's) and these eyes (brown flecked with green)? My eyebrows are darker than my hair but they aren't as dark as Dad's. My skin is a kind of middle brown color, not deep brown like Mom's, and not white like Dad's.

The other thing that doesn't match up here is the hair. It's this enormous lion's mane Afro that looks like it's allowed to do whatever the fuck it wants. If he's anything like me, the boy in the mirror calculates everything. Even though this hair *can't be contained*, he's grown it for a reason. So he can find himself.

Something about the way these features add up is how people find each other in the world. Something about the combination makes them go, *There's Jack Masselin.*

"What's your identifier?" I say to my reflection, and I mean the real identifier, not this giant lion fro. I'm having a right serious moment, but then I hear a distinct snicker, and a tall, skinny blur goes breezing by. That would be my brother Marcus.

"My name's Jack and I'm so pretty," he sings all the way down the stairs.

Top 5 Most Embarrassing Moments of My Life

by Jack Masselin



1. That time my mom picked me up from kindergarten (after getting her hair cut), and in front of my teacher, the other kids, the other parents, and the principal, I accused her of trying to kidnap me.
2. That time I joined the pickup (uniform-free) soccer game at Reynolds Park and passed every ball to the opposite team, setting the all-time park record for Most Disastrous and Humiliating Debut Ever.
3. That time I'd been working with our high school sports therapist because of a shoulder injury, and, in the middle of Walmart, told the man I thought was my baseball coach, *I could use another massage*, only to discover it was actually Mr. Temple, Mom's boss.
4. That time I hit on Jesselle Villegas, and it turned out to be Miss Arbulata, substitute teacher.
5. That time I made out with Caroline Lushamp and it was actually her cousin.



I don't have my license, so Dad drives me. One of the many, many things I get to look forward to this school year is driver's ed. I wait for my father to offer me sage words of advice or a stirring pep talk, but the most he comes up with is "You got this, Libbs. I'll be here to pick you up when it's over." And the way he says it sounds ominous, like we're in the opening scene of a horror movie. Then he gives me a smile, which is the kind of smile they would teach you in a parenting video. It's a nervous smile taped up at the corners. I smile back.

What if I get stuck behind a desk? What if I have to eat lunch alone and no one talks to me for the rest of the school year?

My dad is a big, handsome guy. Salt of the earth. Smart (he does IT security for a big-name computer company). Smushy heart. After they freed me from the house, he had a hard time of it. As awful as it was for me, I think it was worse for him, especially the accusations of neglect and abuse. The press couldn't imagine how else I would have been allowed to get so big. They didn't know about the doctors he took me to and the diets we tried, even as he was mourning the loss of his wife. They didn't see the food I hid from him under my bed and deep in the shadows of my closet. They couldn't know that once I make up my mind about something, I'm going to do it. And I'd made up my mind to eat.

At first, I refused to talk to reporters, but at some point I needed

to show the world that I'm okay and that my dad isn't the villain they made him out to be, stuffing me with candy and cake in an effort to keep me there and dependent on him like those girls from *The Virgin Suicides*. So against my dad's wishes I did one interview with a news station out of Chicago, and that interview traveled all the way to Europe and Asia and back again.

You see, my whole world changed when I was eleven. My mom died, which was traumatic enough, but then the bullying started. It didn't help that I developed early and that all at once my body felt too big for me. I'm not saying I blame my classmates. After all, we were kids. But I just want to make it clear that there were multiple factors at work—the bullying coupled with the loss of my most important person. Through it all, my dad was the one who stood by me.

I say to my dad now, “Did you know that Pauline Potter, the World’s Heaviest Woman, lost ninety-eight pounds having marathon sex?”

“No sex of any kind for you until you’re thirty.”

I think, *We'll see*. After all, miracles happen every day. Which means maybe those kids who were so hateful to me on the playground have grown up and realized the error of their ways. Maybe they’ve actually turned out to be nice. Or maybe they’re even meaner. Every book I read and movie I watch seems to give out the same message: high school is the worst experience you can ever have.

What if I accidentally tell someone off so that I become the Sassy Fat Girl? What if some well-meaning skinny girls adopt me as their own and I become the Fat Best Friend? What if it's clear to everyone that my homeschooling has really only equipped me for eighth grade, not eleventh, because I'm too stupid to understand any of my classwork?

My dad says, “All you have to do is today, Libbs. If it completely

and totally sucks, we can go back to homeschooling. Just give me one day. Actually, don't give it to me. Give yourself one day."

I tell myself: *Today. I tell myself: This is what you dreamed of when you were too scared to leave the house. This is what you dreamed of when you were lying in your bed for six months. This is what you wanted—to be out in the world like everyone else.* I tell myself: *It's taken you two and a half years of fat camps and counselors and psychologists and doctors and behavioral coaches and trainers to get ready for this. For the past two and a half years, you've walked ten thousand steps a day. Every one of them was pointing you to now.*

I can't drive.

I've never been to a dance.

I completely missed middle school.

I've never had a boyfriend, although I did make out with this boy at camp once. His name is Robbie and he's repeating his senior year somewhere in Iowa.

Except for my mom, I've never had a best friend, unless you count the ones I made up for myself—three brothers who lived across the street from my old house. The ones I called Tom, Huck, and Jim, because they went to private school and I didn't know their names. The ones I pretended were my friends.

My dad looks so nervous and hopeful that I grab my bag and push out onto the sidewalk, and then I'm standing in front of the school as people walk past me.

What if I'm late to every class because I can't walk fast enough, and then I get detention, where I will meet the only boys who will pay attention to me—burnouts and delinquents—fall in love with one of them, get pregnant, drop out before I can graduate, and live with my dad for the rest of my life or at least until the baby is eighteen?

I almost get back in the car, but my dad is still sitting there, hopeful smile still on his face. “You got this.” He says it louder this time and—I swear to you—gives me a thumbs-up.

Which is why I join the crowd and let them carry me along until I’m waiting my turn at the entrance, opening my bag so that the guard can check it, walking through metal detectors, stepping into a long hallway that splinters off in all directions, bumped and jostled by elbows and arms. I think, *Somewhere in this school could be a boy I fall in love with. One of these fine young men might be the one who at long last claims my heart and my body. I am the Pauline Potter of Martin Van Buren High School. I am going to sex the rest of this weight right off me.* I’m looking at all the boys going by. *It could be that guy or maybe this one. That’s the beauty of this world. Right now, that boy right there or that one over there means nothing to me, but soon we will meet and change the world, his and mine.*

“Move it, fat-ass,” someone says. I feel the sting of the word, like a pinprick, like the word itself is trying to pop me the way it pops my thought bubble. I forge ahead. The great thing about my size is that I can clear a path.



JACK

Like the hair, the car is part of the image. It's a restored 1968 Land Rover that Marcus and I bought from an elderly uncle. It was originally used for farmwork before it sat rusting for forty-some years, but now it's part Jeep, part all-terrain vehicle, and one hundred percent total badass.

In the passenger seat, Marcus sulks. "Asshole." This is said low and to the window. Unfortunately for me, he got his license a month ago.

"You're adorable. I hope eleventh grade won't spoil your boyish charm. You can drive next year when I'm at college."

If I go to college. If I ever leave this place.

He holds up his middle finger in my direction. From the back, our younger brother, Dusty, kicks the seat. "Stop fighting."

"We're not fighting, little man."

"You sound like Mom and Dad. Make the music louder."

A couple of years ago, my parents got along pretty well. But then Dad was diagnosed with cancer. The week before he was diagnosed I found out he was cheating on my mom. He doesn't know I know, and I'm not sure Mom knows, but sometimes I wonder. He's cancer-clear now, by the way, but it hasn't been easy, especially on Dusty, who's ten.

I turn up the song, an oldie—Justin Timberlake's "SexyBack"—and I can feel myself settling once again into my zone. I've got four

soundtrack songs that I wish would start blasting every time I walk into a room, and this is one of them.

We pull up outside the grade school, and Dusty goes leaping out before I can stop him. I get out after him, taking the keys so Marcus can't drive off with the car.

This summer, Dusty started carrying a purse. No one talks about it—not my mom or dad or Marcus. Dusty is halfway up the walk before I chase him down. I have to keep my eyes on him so I don't lose him. He has the darkest skin of the three of us, and his hair is the color of a copper penny. Like mine, it stands up in all directions. Technically, Mom is half African-American, half Louisiana Creole, and Dad is white and Jewish. Dusty is dark like Mom. Marcus, on the other hand, couldn't be whiter. Me? I'm just Jack Masselin, whoever the hell that is.

Dusty says, "I don't want to be late."

"You won't be. I just wanted to . . . Are you sure about the purse, little man?"

"I like it. I can fit everything in here."

"I like it too. It's a really damn cool purse. But I'm not sure everyone's going to dig it as much as we do. There might be some kids here who are going to be so jealous of that purse that they'll make fun of you." I see about ten of them walking past us right now.

"They won't be jealous. They'll think it's weird."

"I just don't want anyone to be rough on you."

"If I want to carry a purse, I'm going to carry it. I'm not going to not carry it just because they don't like it."

And in that moment, this scrawny kid with big ears is my hero. As he walks away, I watch the way he moves, straight as an arrow, chin up. I want to follow him all the way into school to make sure nothing happens to him.

7 Careers for Someone with Prosopagnosia

by Jack Masselin



1. Shepherd (assuming face blindness doesn't extend to dogs and sheep)
2. Tollbooth operator (assuming no one you know is taking the route you're working)
3. Rock star/boy band member, NBA player, or some other profession along these lines (where people expect you to have an ego so massive, they won't be surprised if you don't remember them)
4. Writer (the most recommended job for people with social anxiety disorders)
5. Dog walker/trainer (see number one, above)
6. Embalmer (except that I might get the corpses mixed up)
7. Hermit (ideal except the pay isn't very good)



I clear a path all the way to my first class, where I take a seat in the row closest to the door, in case I need to flee at some point. I *just* fit behind the desk. Under my shirt, my back is damp, and my heart skips a beat. No one can see it, though. At least, I hope no one can see it because there's nothing worse than being known as the sweaty fat girl. As my classmates trickle in, a few of them stare. A couple of them snicker. I don't recognize any of the eleven-year-old kids I once knew in these teenage faces.

But school is exactly what I expected, yet more at the same time. For one thing, Martin Van Buren High School has about two thousand students, so it is a place packed with commotion. For another, no one looks as shiny and polished as they do in the TV and movie versions of high school. Real teens aren't twenty-five years old. We have bad skin and bad hair and good skin and good hair and we're all different shapes and sizes. I like us better than our TV selves, even though sitting here, I feel like an actor playing a part. I'm the fish out of water, the new girl at school. *What will my story be?*

I decide that what I've got here is a clean slate. As far as I'm concerned, this is me starting over, and whatever happened when I was eleven, twelve, thirteen doesn't exist now. I'm different. They're different, at least on the outside. Maybe they won't remember I was *that girl*. I don't plan on reminding them.

I look them in the eye and give them my father's new signature taped-up-corner smile. This seems to surprise them. A couple of them smile back. The boy next to me holds out his hand. "Mick."

"Libby."

"I'm from Copenhagen. I'm here for the exchange program." Even with crow-black hair, he is Viking-like. "Are you from Amos?"

I want to say, *I'm an exchange student too. I'm here from Australia. I'm here from France.* But the only boys I've talked to in the past five years are the ones at fat camp, which is why I don't do anything but nod.

He tells me how he wasn't sure at first whether to come here, but then he decided it would be a good experience to see the heartland of the States and "the way most Americans live." Whatever that means.

I manage to say, "What's your favorite thing about Indiana?"

"That I get to go home one day."

He laughs, so I laugh, and then two girls walk in and their eyes go immediately to me. One of them whispers something to the other, and they take the seats in front of us. There's something familiar about these girls, but I can't place them. *Maybe I knew them before.* My skin prickles and I have that horror movie feeling again. I look up at the ceiling as if a piano is about to fall on my head. Because I know it's going to come from somewhere. It always does.

I tell myself to give Mick a chance, give these girls a chance, give this day a chance, give myself a chance most of all. The way I see it, I've lost my mom, eaten myself nearly to death, been cut out of my house while the whole country watched, endured exercise regimes and diets and the nation's disappointment, and I've received hate mail from total strangers.

It is disgusting that anyone would ever let themselves get so large,

and it is disgusting that your father wouldn't do anything about it. I hope you survive this and get straight with God. There are people starving in the world and it is shameful that you would eat so much when others don't have enough.

So I ask you, what can high school do to me that hasn't already been done?